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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an account of one school district's creation of a director of guidance position, the search for the best candidate, and the new director's beginning experiences on the job. The author discusses how she met the first challenges in the job, such as resistance from the school counselors and building support from school administration. She also describes the initial changes made in professional development, performance evaluation, and budgeting. Some of the lessons learned in the first few years are presented. (ADT)

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Establishing a New Position: District Director of Guidance

by

Gloria Larivee

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Chapter Three

Establishing a New Position: *District Director of Guidance*

Gloria Larivee
Rolla School District, Rolla Missouri

Rolla, located in south-central Missouri, is unusual for a rural community because of the presence of the University of Missouri–Rolla, a top-rated engineering school. More than 25 other state and federal agencies are located in Rolla, including the U.S. Geological Survey, and Fort Leonard Wood is only a short distance away. A large percentage of parents work in professional positions and are very involved in the community and schools.

The Rolla Public School District has a population of approximately 4,500 students in grades K–12. Additionally, the district has a vocational-technical center that is a host school for students from 12 school districts. Each year 300 to 350 Rolla High School students attend vocational programming in one of the two buildings. The district has one high school, serving grades 10–12, with a population of approximately 1,100 students. The junior high school consists of grades 8 and 9; the middle school houses grades 5 to 7, and there are three elementary schools. There are 11 counselors in the district.

Job Description

Until I was hired, the Rolla Public Schools had no director of guidance. The guidance program was under the supervision of an assistant superintendent. The superintendent, who was relatively new to the district, had a goal of creating a director of guidance position. This superintendent had experienced effective guidance programs in other districts and recognized the need for districtwide coordination.

To initiate a candidate search, a job description was developed describing the qualifications desired in applicants. Counselor certification and experience were considered an absolute, as was leadership experience. Additionally,

experience with the Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program and a broad vision of how the guidance program would fit with all other educational programming was considered essential. A working knowledge of the Missouri School Improvement Program, the Missouri Assessment Program, and other state and federal initiatives were desired. Excellent communication skills, too, were considered critical. In recognition that organizational and communication patterns were important, the director of guidance would report directly to the superintendent and serve on the district leadership team.

The preceding description clearly indicates that the superintendent and board of education spent considerable time developing the role the director of guidance would play in the Rolla Public Schools. Their assumption was that counselors would be pleased to have "one of their own" coordinating guidance activities and advocating for them. When I was hired, I expected some resistance, but I also assumed the counselors would view this new position in a positive way.

First Challenge: Resistance

> Leaders understand that resistance to change is common, especially when not only the leader but the leadership position are new. We recognize that change is difficult and takes time. Our challenge is getting people involved and having them feel ownership in the change process. This process reminds me of a popular joke: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? . . . One—but only if the light bulb really wants to be changed." A key issue for guidance leaders is getting administrators and counselors in the district sincerely to want to change the way they have been doing business.

Without a director of guidance, counselors in the Rolla School District had operated in their own building "silos." Each counselor was comfortable with what he or she was doing and did not give much thought to what was going on in the other buildings. With no coordination among buildings, no organized district meetings, and no districtwide goals, the school counselor was not accountable to anyone other than the building principal. Many principals did not understand the concept of comprehensive guidance, and some did not agree with it. As a result, some counselors were encouraged to engage—and were engaging—in many non-guidance activities. For example, one counselor was spending a large percentage of time developing the master schedule and performing other computer-related activities. It was apparent that two things needed to happen right away: (a) an in-service for the building administrators on comprehensive guidance, and (b) a time and task analysis to assess exactly how the counselors were spending their time.

Considerable effort was spent in developing a time and task analysis form that would consume little of the counselors' time. All forms were to be sent to me, and I would be responsible for compiling all the information. I thought the process had been simplified to the point where it would be relatively painless. Although I expected some hesitation, I was not prepared for the amount of resistance that followed. Not only did the counselors resist being accountable for their time, their administrators did not want them to be! There was a general feeling that the counselors had managed just fine in the past and had done so without being accountable for their time. If they were now being asked to document their activities, someone must think they were not doing their jobs.

Over time a niche had been carved out for counselors in each building, and neither the counselors nor the administrators wanted that to change. I naively thought the counselors would view the time and task analysis as an opportunity to show how many non-guidance activities they were doing and to get rid of some of these activities. I soon came to realize that many of the counselors enjoyed the non-guidance activities and did not want these responsibilities minimized. The administrators also were resistant because they liked having the counselors do tasks that otherwise would have to be reassigned. The counselors convinced the administrators that the time and task analysis was unnecessary. Their attitude was, "If it's not broken, don't fix it." Administrators were comfortable with what passed for a guidance program in their buildings and did not see a need for change. They did not want to explore the non-guidance responsibilities their counselors were performing or ways of reassigning these responsibilities, and they certainly were not interested in redefining the role of the counselor. They were comfortable with the status quo. I quickly realized that my new leadership position would be considerably more challenging than I had expected!

Second Challenge: Building Support

At this point, having the support of the superintendent and the board of education was critical. Even though some of the administrators did not like the direction the district was heading, they knew they had to be at least somewhat cooperative because I had the backing of district leaders. However, I wanted them to cooperate because they believed in the value of the change. I believe it is imperative that the stakeholders in an organization take ownership in the change process. [There is a large literature on the "change process"– consult ERIC for references. Also Allen (1998).] Without the stakeholders embracing the changes, the ideas never truly become incorporated into the organization. I didn't want the changes I initiated to be one more document placed in a nice notebook

on a shelf. Convincing the stakeholders that the desired change would be good for everyone, especially the students, became the real challenge. In taking on the challenge of getting as many of the administrators on board as possible, I remembered to focus on the 80-20 rule. I decided to concentrate my energy where I thought it would be most beneficial, rather than spending 80% of my time on the 20% that most likely would never change. I knew this process would take time and would have to be based on mutual trust and respect. I also knew that I would have to earn my stripes.

My first task was to develop strategies to break down the barriers while garnering support from other sources. I knew it was important to get the counselors to think as a team and understand the "big picture." I scheduled monthly luncheon meetings with the main purpose of building camaraderie and a sense of teamwork. The agenda was always brief, allowing time for each counselor to share activities going on in his or her building and to network with peers. Work and in-service training sessions were scheduled on professional development days, when more time was available.

Prior to my arrival, each building had a guidance advisory committee made up of parents; however, no districtwide committee had ever been formed. Because I believe that a representative sample of the various publics served needs to be represented on an advisory committee in order to have open, honest dialogue, I asked each counselor to nominate one parent to serve on a districtwide advisory committee. Additional people were added to represent community resources and expertise. The committee was apprised of the district strategic plan and the district guidance goals the counselors had developed in their team meetings. They were provided with an orientation about what a comprehensive guidance program entails and the counselor's role in each of the four components of the program. The committee was asked to provide the counselors with input about the community's perception of their role. Currently results from a needs assessment are also being studied. The committee also is helping establish community partnerships to meet some of the established goals. These committee members are now advocates for a true comprehensive guidance program, and their expectations are to see that happen in the district.

Initial Changes

Initially I focused on three areas for change: professional development, performance evaluation, and budget.

Professional Development

In terms of correlating professional development activities with district goals, the schools' professional development activities had lacked

coordination. Previously, the building principal had approved the counselors' leave requests. I instituted a policy whereby the building principal approves the request and forwards it to me for final approval. The goal of this policy is to ensure that the counselors are participating in professional development activities that coincide with district guidance goals and to eliminate training that does not enhance counseling skills or meet district guidance goals. In addition, more professional development is now being provided within the district to help counselors refine their skills and develop new skills that are necessary to meet identified needs.

When the idea of an in-service on comprehensive guidance was proposed, many of the building administrators felt they were already well versed in the model; however, I believed a refresher would probably be a good investment of time and money. Although research is available to document the positive effect that a fully implemented guidance program has on a school district, I wanted the administrators to hear from some of their peers who had experienced it. I contacted the director of guidance at another district in the state that has an excellent guidance program. She and the assistant superintendent, who was instrumental in the implementation of the guidance program, came and spent the day with the administrators discussing the change process that had occurred in their district. They gave practical suggestions on how to reassign non-guidance duties and discussed the many positive changes that had occurred in their district as a result of their comprehensive program. The meeting gave the administrators an opportunity to discuss their concerns, ask questions, and get answers. A lot of good dialogue took place, and I sensed a change in attitudes from that point forward.

Performance Evaluation

In the past evaluations were done by the building administrator, who often had little understanding of the role of the counselor and the components of a comprehensive guidance program. To correct this situation, the district human resources director worked with the guidance team and me to develop a new evaluation process that reflected the components of a comprehensive guidance program. This new process will be implemented during the next school year. The building administrator still has the ultimate responsibility for evaluating the counselor, with input from the director of guidance. The director will work cooperatively with the building administrator to determine how effectively the components of the guidance program are being implemented. Input from the director will be incorporated into the summative evaluation.

Budget

Budget is another issue that will be changed in the next school year. When the director of guidance position was created, a budget was established, but it is only for districtwide activities. The building principal still controlled the budget for supplies, professional development activities, and equipment at the building level. In most buildings, the guidance department currently is not allocated a specific amount. If the counselors need something, the request goes to the principal, who decides if money is available. Next year the director of guidance will have a budget based on identified program needs. This will help counselors plan for their activities because they will know how much money is available.

Lessons Learned

Clearly, this journey has not been a smooth one. During the past few years I have learned many things. One is that my enthusiam is not necessarily contagious. I have learned that no matter what kind of credentials I have, I still have to earn my stripes. I have been reminded that change is a slow—in some cases very slow—process. I have learned that in order to survive and grow in this type of leadership position, I must be very passionate about my cause. Without total commitment to my task, I could not persevere. I have also learned that some aspects of being a director of guidance are difficult. Making administrative decisions sometimes takes me out of my comfort zone. Professional peer groups are not as available in this position as in most others. Many Missouri school districts do not have a director of guidance, particularly in the rural areas. There is a definite need for more networking. Although I appreciate the support I have found in my district and in the community, being able to network with others in similar positions is invaluable.

This journey has taken several twists and turns, sometimes moving forward and sometimes regressing. There are many days when I have to remind myself that this is, after all, a work in progress. The ultimate goal is providing better opportunities for our students, which is what makes all the effort worthwhile!

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About the Author

Gloria Larivee has been director of guidance for the Rolla School District in Missouri for six years. Her current responsibilities also include being coordinator of the Missouri School Improvement Program. Previously, she has been a high school counselor, has worked in the departments of Teacher Certification and Professional Development in the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, has been a counselor in a mental health center, has taught gifted students, and has been an adjunct faculty member at several Missouri graduate schools. In addition, she has been a Missouri state trainer for several statewide guidance-related projects. She can be reached at glarivee@rolla.k12.mo.us.